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PASSING SCENE

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State Department and Security

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Since the case can still be appealed, it would be improper to discuss the State Department's decision to remove Otto F. Otepka as its chief security evaluations officer. He was charged with giving confidential documents and other unauthorized assistance to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee.

There are two larger issues, however, which deserve public attention, quite apart from Mr. Otepka's case. They concern the security arrangements of the State Department, and the limits beyond which a congressional committee should not go in its relations with that department.

Dean Acheson has admitted that the executive order passed in the Truman administration led to avoidable personal tragedies in the enforcement of security regulations. This order was passed during the demoralization produced by the McCarthy period. Even a man with Mr. Acheson's sense of fairness, and his devotion to the State Department, could not always resist unjust and unfair pressures. The same unhappy tale was repeated under Mr. Dulles's tenure as Secretary of State, sometimes with even more grievous results.

Change in Temper

By the time Mr. Herter became Secretary the fever of suspicion and intolerance had pretty well abated. It was no longer popular or expedient to explain the difficulties of American policy by the random accusation that a Communist spy or a Communist dupe had crept into a position of power in the State Department.

During this bad period, it became clear to a large number of Americans that the State Department could never function effectively if its ambassadors and officials had to work in fear of a congressional post-mortem. In the nature of things, Congress would interest itself only in those situations where mistakes had been made or where it was possible to improve the situation.

to political advantage. It was necessary therefore to avoid a congressional policy of harassment if a frank and comprehensive debate was to mark the shaping of policy in the State Department.

But the recognition of this sound principle does not end the matter. It does not, for example, dispose of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. That committee has been given a mandate by Congress to ask detailed and searching questions of the executive branch. It is definitely not an intruder when it questions members of the State Department, provided it respects the privileges of executive secrecy inherent in the conduct of diplomacy and directs its inquiries to a valid legislative purpose.

But this particular committee lacks the knowledge of American policy that is enjoyed by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It does not receive a continuous stream of information on world affairs. It is very much an outsider in its relations with the State Department. By training and instinct, it tends to look for guilty men when something has gone sour in Cuba or Viet Nam or the Dominican Republic. It is no wonder that the State Department is on guard when this committee is carrying out an investigation. Nor is it surprising that this very sensitivity raises the suspicion in the committee that the State Department is being less than candid and co-operative. Hence the strained relations between the committee and the department.

Under the British system, in England the Foreign Office would be represented in Parliament by the foreign secretary, who would be personally responsible for the conduct of that vast department. No official could be harassed or questioned without having the right to go at once to the foreign secretary for protection. Besides, nothing remotely comparable to the Senate Internal Security Committee can be found in Parliament.

Role for Secretary of State

It is futile, of course, to mix the British tradition with the American technique of government. But is there nothing to be learned from that tradition? Surely the lesson must be that the Secretary of State should personally be informed of the objectives of any Senate investigation, and he must also know why subordinate officials are to be investigated or questioned. No coherent policy, especially in areas of controversy, can be formulated if minor officials are free to tell tales about their superiors to a Senate committee. Using the Secretary of State in an investigation would not mean that the investigation would be handicapped or impeded: It would merely mean that every investigation would be orderly and responsible.

In addition, the State Department should ask the President to revise the executive order on internal security in the light of present conditions. That would be the best way to make constructive use of this unfortunate case.